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ABSTRACT

This short description of the sound and spelling systems of the Vietnamese language is intended for the sponsor, teacher or friend (of Vietnamese refugees) who may have difficulty in pronouncing Vietnamese names, reading handwriting, or using a Vietnamese-English dictionary or phrasebook. Focusing primarily on the Southern dialect of Vietnamese, the guide discusses such areas as syllable structure, consonants, vowels, tones, punctuation, handwriting, and the Vietnamese alphabet. (Author/DI)

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GENERAL INFORMATION SERIES: A Brief Look at the Vietnamese Language: Sounds and Spellings

The purpose of this bulletin is to give a short description of the sound and spelling systems of the Vietnamese language. The information presented here will be useful to the sponsor, teacher or friend in practical matters such as pronouncing Vietnamese names, reading handwriting and using a Vietnamese-English dictionary or phrasebook. We hope, however, that the information in this bulletin will have the further effect of stimulating the American to learn more about the Vietnamese language and culture, both for his own enjoyment, and for the benefit of the Vietnamese with whom he comes into contact.

We will, throughout the bulletin, be talking about the sounds and tones of Vietnamese, and how they differ from those of English. But written descriptions of sounds, no matter how detailed, are a poor substitute for hearing the sounds and noting the differences first-hand. We encourage the reader, therefore, to ask a native speaker of Vietnamese to demonstrate the sounds whenever possible, and have included numerous examples of Vietnamese words for this purpose. The teacher is also encouraged to try imitating the native speaker's pronunciation, not only for an understanding of Vietnamese phonology, but also for an increased appreciation of his student's difficulties in learning English.

Pronunciation of the Vietnamese words will vary slightly from speaker to speaker, depending on where in Vietnam the speaker comes from: there are three major dialects, Northern, Central and Southern. While these dialects differ, sometimes very markedly, a speaker of one of them has no great difficulty understanding or communicating with a speaker of another.

In general, we are describing the Southern dialect, which is spoken in Saigon.

Syllable structure

Vietnamese is a monosyllabic language: all words consist of only one syllable. Moreover, the syllables themselves always consist of one or the other of the combinations of consonants and vowels listed below:

A. One, two or three vowels; e.g., ô 'checkerboard square', ế 'slow' (as in business), ao 'pond', ai 'who?', oai 'impressive-looking'.

B. Consonant + one, two, or three vowels; e.g., ba 'three', cô 'Miss', tôi 'I', bao 'bag', tiêu 'black pepper', xoay 'pirouette'.

C. One, or two vowels + consonant; e.g., em 'younger sibling', ơn 'favor', ươn 'rotten', oan 'unjust'.

D. Consonant + one, two, or three vowels + consonant; e.g., cam 'orange', cúc 'chrysanthemum', tuần 'week', mượn 'borrow', tuyết 'snow'.

Note that while vowels can occur together in Vietnamese syllables, consonants cannot: there are no consonant clusters in Vietnamese.

Consonants

Vietnamese consonants are for the most part roughly similar to parallel consonants in English. But their distribution -- their occurrence, either initial (at the beginning) or final (at the end) in syllables -- often differs from their distribution in English, and their exact pronunciation differs in subtle but noticeable ways from the pronunciation of their English counterparts.

The Vietnamese consonants are listed on the following pages. The letter of the alphabet is given first, then its distribution, then the sound it represents, and then an example.

CONSONANTS

LETTER	POSITION	SOUND	EXAMPLE
b-	initial	b as in boy	ba 'three'
c-	initial except before e, ê, i, y	k as in skill	ca 'sing'
-c	final following a, ă, â, e, uô, ư, ươ	k as in take	nhạc 'music' sức 'strength' đuốc 'torch'
-c	final following o, ô, u	k as in take, and p as in stop, simultaneously (it will sound like a p)	khóc 'weep' cúc 'chrysanthemum' mốc 'mildew'
ch-	initial	ch as in chop (it will sometimes sound more like ty-)	cho 'give' cha 'father'
-ch	final	t as in lit	đích 'target'
d-	initial	y as in young	da 'skin'
đ-	initial	d as in done	đi 'go'
g-	initial except before e, ê, i	doesn't exist in English. Like Spanish g as in lago	ga 'chicken' gỗ 'wood'
gh-	initial before e, ê, i	same sound as g	ghi 'record'
gi-	initial	y as in yard	giờ 'hour' già 'old'
h-	initial	h as in hat	hai 'two'

CONSONANTS

LETTER	POSITION	SOUND	EXAMPLE
k-	initial before e, ê, i, y	k as in skill (same sound as c)	kể 'narrate'
kh-	initial	doesn't exist in English. (German ch as in ach)	không 'no'
l-	initial	l as in lane	lên 'go up'
m-, -m	initial, final	m as in man, dim	ma 'ghost' nam 'south'
n-	initial	n as in no	no 'full'
-n	final following i, e	n as in ten	xin 'beg' đến 'arrive'
-n	final following a, ă, â, e, o, ô, ơ, u	ng as in song	đan 'knit' hôn 'kiss'
-n	final following o, ô, u	alternative pronunciation from ng as listed just above: same as for -ng listed just below	hôn 'kiss' son 'lipstick' lùn 'short'
-ng	final following o, ô, u	ng as in song, and m as in sum simultaneously (it will sound like m)	mong 'hope' lông 'hair' nhung 'velvet'
-ng	final following a, ă, â, e, ư	ng as in song	hang 'cave' xà-beng 'crowbar'
nh-	initial	ny as in canyon	nhà 'house'
-nh	final following a, e, i	n as in ten	xanh 'blue' xinh 'cute' lệnh 'order'
-p	final	p as in top	bếp 'kitchen'

CONSONANTS

LETTER	POSITION	SOUND	EXAMPLE
ph-	initial	f as in Philip	phép 'permit'
qu-	initial	kw as in squire, or w as in wet	qua 'cross over'
r-	initial	r as in raw	ra 'go out'
s-	initial	sh as in show	so 'number'
t-	initial	t as in stop	toi 'I'
-t	final following ê, i	t as in lit	ít 'little' vết 'trace'
-t	final following a, ă, â, e, o, u, ô, ơ, ư	k as in take	bọt 'foam' một 'one' phút 'minute'
-t	final following o, ô, u	alternative pronunciation from -t listed just above: k as in take and p as in top simultaneously. It will sound like a p.	bọt 'foam' một 'one' phút 'minute'
th-	initial	t as in time. It will sound as though there is a long h afterward.	thơ 'letter'
tr-	initial	tr as in strong	tre 'bamboo'
v-	initial	v as in van, or vy as in revue	vườn 'garden'
x-	initial	s as in sing	xin 'beg'

Vowels

The vowels of Vietnamese, like the consonants, are by and large similar to parallel vowels in English. As in, though, they differ from their counterparts in subtle but noticeable ways. They are listed below: the letter of the alphabet is given first, then the sound it represents, then a Vietnamese example.

VOWELS

LETTER	SOUND	EXAMPLE
i	ee as in beet	đi 'go'
ê	ay as in play	đê 'dike'
e	e as in bet, or a as in bat. It will sound like both or either	xe 'vehicle'
ơ	more or less like uh as in love	tơ 'silk'
ô	o as in go	tô 'bowl'
u	oo as in too, boot	xu 'cent'
ư	like oo as in book, but with the lips spread	tư 'fourth'
a	like a as in father	ca 'sing'
ă	like a, only shorter in length	an 'eat'
â	like o, only shorter in length	cân 'weigh'
o	like a, but with lips rounded	to 'big'
y	same sound as i	ly 'glass'

Tones

The most interesting -- and difficult to learn -- aspect of Vietnamese is its tones. Vietnamese, like Chinese, is a tone language: every word has a particular tone always associated with it, and if a speaker does not pronounce the correct tone for a word, he either mispronounces the word, or pronounces another word entirely.

(English has 'tones' too, but they are associated with sentences rather than words, and called 'intonation patterns': the difference in meaning between "Now?" and "Now.", or between "He's a doctor?" and "He's a doctor.", is expressed by different intonation patterns.)

There are five tones in the Southern dialect of Vietnamese, each represented in the spelling system by a mark (called a diacritic) over or under one of the vowels in the syllable. In the chart below, the tones are listed. First, the Vietnamese name of the tone is given, then its diacritic, then a rough English description, then examples.

Vietnamese Name	Diacritic	English Description	Examples
Ngang	a (no marking)	mid-level	co 'flex', ban 'committee'
Sắc	á	high-rising	có 'have', bán 'sell'
Huyền	à	low-falling	cò 'stork', bàn 'table'
Hỏi or ngã	ả or ã	mid-rising	cỏ 'grass', bản 'copy'
Nặng	ạ	low-rising	cọ 'scrub-brush', bạn 'friend'

There is another tone, the Ngã tone (ã), which in the Southern dialect sounds the same as the Hỏi tone (ả). In the Northern dialect it is a different tone.

Any written description of the way tones sound is inadequate; we urge the reader, here if nowhere else, to ask a native speaker of Vietnamese to pronounce the examples. In the absence of direct experience, however, we can give a very rough idea of the way the tones sound by comparing them to parallel intonation patterns in English.

The Sắc, or high-rising tone, is somewhat parallel to the intonation given in English to the "no" of an emphatic rendition of the phrase "No way!"; the Huyền, or low-falling tone, is somewhat parallel to the

intonation given to the "way" of the same phrase. The Hỏi, or mid-rising tone, is fairly close to the intonation given to the question "Now?" (in fact, the English question "Now?" is a nearly exact pronunciation of the Vietnamese word não 'brains'!) The Nặng, or low-rising tone, is somewhat like the intonation given the English word "yeah" (as in "...and then when the cops got there..." "Yeah? Yeah?"). And if you count in English very fast -- as if you were playing hide-and-seek -- you will be giving each word the Ngang, or mid-level tone.

Features to watch for

(c), (k), (t), (th). Both Vietnamese and English have what linguists call aspirated and unaspirated stops. Aspirated stops are produced by stopping the airflow from the lungs for a semi-second, then releasing it in such a way that there is a relatively strong puff of air following the release. (English p, t, and k in initial positions are aspirated stops: If you say 'pan, tan, and can' while holding the back of your hand close to your mouth, you can feel the puff of air.) Unaspirated stops, on the other hand, are produced by stopping the air flow, but releasing it so that there is no puff of air following the release. (English p, t, and k following s, and usually in final position, are unaspirated stops; if you say 'span, Stan and scan' with the back of your hand close to your mouth, you won't feel the puff of air that was there when you said 'pan, tan, and can'.) English speakers are not aware of the difference between, say aspirated and unaspirated t because it is not an important difference: the word Stan pronounced with an aspirated t will merely sound odd. In Vietnamese, however, the distinction between aspirated and unaspirated stops is important. The sounds represented by the letters c, k and t are unaspirated (see the list of consonants) and, because they occur in positions where English unaspirated stops do not occur, they are hard to distinguish: to Americans, the Vietnamese k and c will sound like g as in get, and t will sound like d as in dog. Vietnamese has only one aspirated stop, represented by the letters th; it is not difficult for Americans to hear, but it is not pronounced as English aspirated t is: it sounds instead as though there were a long h after it (a result of the puff of air being lengthened). To discover the difference between Vietnamese

aspirated th, unaspirated t, and đ, ask a native speaker to pronounce for you the following:

thi 'be tested'	tí 'tiny'	đi 'go'
thỏ 'rabbit'	to 'big'	đỏ 'red'

Doubly articulated sounds

In the Southern dialect, Vietnamese -n (following o, ô and u), -ng (following o, ô and u) and -t (following o, ô and u) are what linguists call doubly-articulated sounds: they are, in effect, two sounds produced simultaneously. This is physically possible because the sounds in question are produced in different parts of the mouth: -ng, for example, is produced with the back of the tongue and the soft palate, and -m is produced with the lips, so -ng and -m can be produced at the same time, as they are in Vietnamese. English does not have doubly-articulated sounds, so Americans have difficulty distinguishing them from singly-articulated sounds. In particular, the American will hear the doubly-articulated Vietnamese -n or -ng as m, and the doubly-articulated Vietnamese -t or -c as p. To discover the difference between -ng (or -n) and -m, ask a native speaker of Vietnamese to pronounce the following pair: chung 'together' and chum 'earthen jar'. And to discover the difference between -t or -c and -p, ask him to pronounce: hột 'grain', học 'study', and hộp 'box'.

Unreleased final consonants

It will often seem to you that the last consonant in a syllable is 'swallowed' or maybe not pronounced at all. The consonants are pronounced, but are so short that they are very difficult to hear for the American not trained in phonetics. If you listen carefully, though, you can hear them, especially if they are contrasted with no-sound-at-all, as in pairs like pha 'mix', Pháp 'France'; chú 'uncle', chúng 'they'; cá 'fish', cát 'sand'.

The Vietnamese Alphabet

The original native writing system of Vietnamese was a modification of Chinese characters, and was the sole writing system for Vietnamese between

the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the seventeenth century, the Portuguese priest Alexandre de Rhodes, and other Europeans and Vietnamese, developed a new writing system to further their evangelical work with the Vietnamese. This writing system was a Roman alphabet, modified with diacritics so that it could represent the sounds of Vietnamese for which there were no Roman symbols, and of course the tones. The two writing systems -- the Chinese-based and the Roman-based -- were used side-by-side for some time, although by different segments of Vietnamese society. Gradually, however, the Roman-based alphabet replaced the Chinese-based writing system, so that today it is the only writing system in general use. All of the examples of Vietnamese in the previous sections of this bulletin are spelled in conventional Vietnamese spelling currently in use.

The Vietnamese alphabet is phonetic: there is, by and large, one letter or combination of letters per sound, and only one. (This is why we were able to present the sounds of Vietnamese letter by letter on the charts on pages 3 - 6; the same kind of chart for English would have to be done sound by sound, with very messy results!) The one sound-one symbol correspondence works perfectly for the Northern dialect, for which the alphabet was originally designed, but there are minor breakdowns in the Central and Southern dialects: both the letters d and gi, for example, represent the same sound in the Southern dialect (the y sound as in yes). In none of the dialects, however, does one symbol represent more than one sound.

The letter combinations which represent single sounds are treated as though they are single letters. In dictionaries, for example, words beginning with ch are listed separately, after all the words beginning with c. For dictionary purposes, then, the order of the letters of the alphabet is as follows:

a, ă, â, b, c, ch, d, đ, e, ê, g, gh, gi, h, i, k, kh, l, m, n, ng, ngh, nh, o, ô, ơ, p, ph, qu, r, s, t, th, tr, u, ư, v, x y.

The tones, also, occur in a particular order; our example words on page 7, for example, occur in dictionaries in the following order:

ban 'committee'; bán 'sell'; bàn 'table'; bản 'copy'; bạn 'friend'.

Another example of ordering:

ma 'ghost'; má 'cheek'; mà (a structure word indicating various kinds of outcomes); mả 'tomb'; mã (Sino-Vietnamese root for horse); mạ 'rice seedling'.

Punctuation

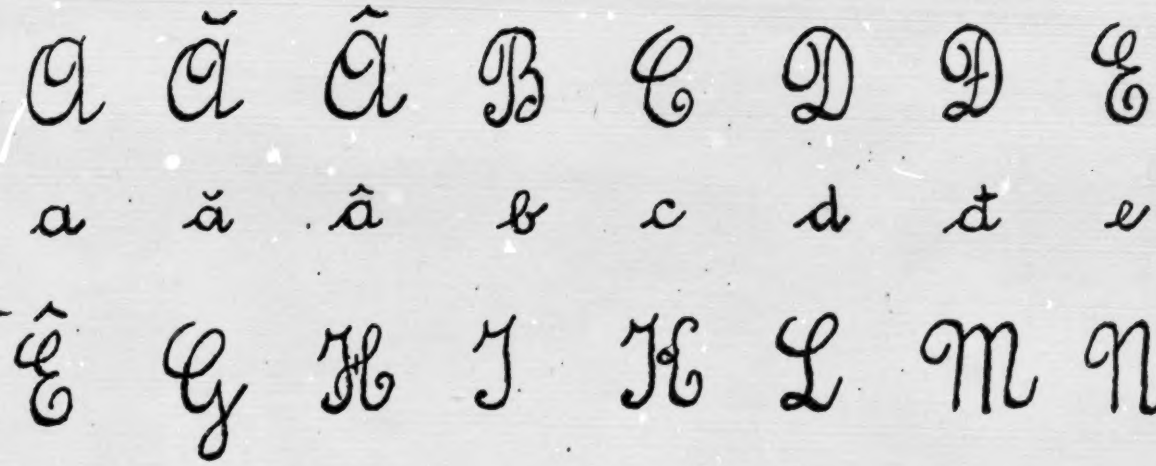
As we mentioned before, words in Vietnamese are all one syllable long. Often, however, two words will function together as compounds, very much like English compounds such as orange juice, airport, brow-beat, and so on. Most of these compounds are formed with root words borrowed from Chinese: cách-mạng 'revolution' (literally, 'change of mandate'); phi-cơ 'airplane' (literally, 'flying craft'); other compounds are onomatopoetic words like lóc-cóc 'knock-knock' and cạp-cạp 'quack-quack', or what linguists call reduplicative syllables like dễ-dàng 'easy', and sạch-sẽ 'clean'. These compounds are spelled with hyphens, as above, in formal contexts like proclamations or textbooks; in informal contexts, like newspapers or letters, the hyphens are often omitted.

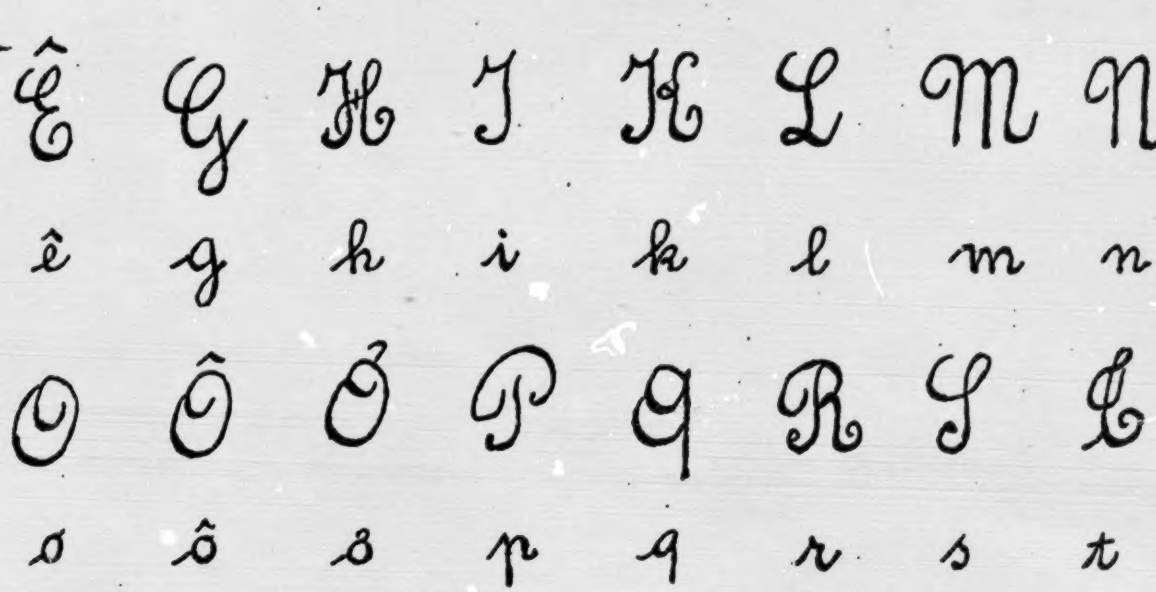
Hyphens come and go in compound place names as well. There are many names of cities and countries which are compounds (Vietnam is a compound: Viet (name of a tribe of people) + nam 'south'); in the western languages, these are usually spelled as one word, e.g. Vietnam, Saigon, Danang. In Vietnamese, these can occur with or without the hyphen, and with or without the first letter of the second syllable capitalized: Vietnam, then, will appear as Việt-nam, Việt-Nam, Việt nam, or Việt Nam in Vietnamese writing.

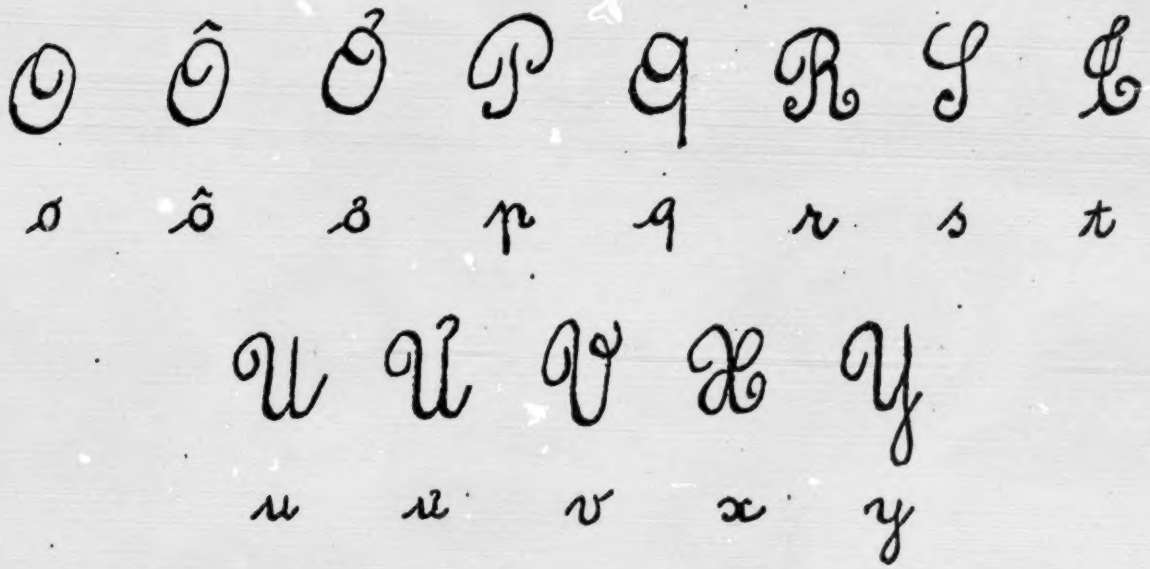
Other than the hyphens, punctuation and capitalization are much the same as in English.

Handwriting

Vietnamese handwriting is very much like American English handwriting, although there are three or four characters which differ slightly. Here is the ideal:







Here is a sample of an eight-year-old's rendition of the ideal:

Bác Quả MẾN

Thưa bác Quả ! bác có mạnh khoẻ không, anh Ba
cũng mạnh không chị Tin có mạnh không hả bác.
còn bác nhưng cũng vậy.

Phương

(Phuong's sample is a letter to her uncle, asking after members of his family.)

and a nine-year-old's:

Àmã Thư, Thuý, Thuyên, Thi,
có mạnh không hả Bác. Mong thơ
bác gởi trả lại để trả lời.

Vũ

and an adult's:

Chị Quỳnh Hoa,

Tôi phải đi có việc gấp chiều
1 giờ trưa mới về.
Nhờ chị kêu nó mấy giờ
nó tới có mấy cái máy
không, rồi cho tôi biết.
543- 2793 ở New York.

Note that in fast handwriting the tone marks appear anywhere over the syllable, rather than over the last vowel of the syllable, which is where they go in careful writing.

References

All of the studies on the sounds and spellings of Vietnamese are extremely technical. Most appear as Ph.D. dissertations or M.A. theses. However, if the reader would like to delve further into the subject, we suggest the following book:

Vuong Gia Thuy. Vietnamese in a Nutshell. New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1975. $2.45. Paperback.

A linguistically-oriented, but easy-to-use phrasebook and grammar, with an 8,000 word Vietnamese-English, English-Vietnamese dictionary. Describes differences in Vietnamese dialects, outlines pronunciation and tonal system as well as basic sentence patterns. Small enough for pocket or purse.